NATO and Strategic PSYOPS: Policy Pariah or Growth Industry?

Steven Collins

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Abstract:

In the aftermath of 9/11, NATO must adapt and face the realities of the modern security environment -- where current and potential threats to peace will seek to confront NATO through asymmetric means, particularly aggressive local and international perception manipulation, rather than through the use of conventional military forces. This paper examines current NATO PSYOPS policy, reasons why NATO should make changes, how NATO fared in its PSYOPS efforts during ALLIED FORCE, and recommends specific changes to the status quo.

> "The Serbs…were excellent in organizing press coverage and directing it toward NATO mistakes. Where were the compelling eyewitness stories and snapshots of the ethnic cleansing, the brutality and destruction? In this war, a camera inside Kosovo would have been worth a dozen strikes on Serb vehicles." (Clark 2001)

In the aftermath of 9/11, among many other changes to its defense establishment, the United States has undertaken a significant re-vamping of its strategic psychological operations (PSYOPS) structure and capabilities (Dao and Schmidt 2002). Similarly, NATO must now determine if it can adapt and face the realities of the modern security environment -- where current and potential threats to peace will confront NATO through asymmetric means rather than through the use of conventional military forces. Of particular interest in this study, are unconventional attempts to confront NATO via aggressive regional and international perception manipulation (Murray 1999 and Thomas 1999).

Presently, NATO PSYOPS efforts are limited by a restrictive policy that prohibits the organization from conducting any perception management activities above the level of the local military commander. Operating in this hamstrung manner exposes a tremendous weakness in NATO's political and military capabilities, as amply demonstrated during Operation ALLIED FORCE. This paper examines the current NATO PSYOPS policy, reasons why NATO should make changes, how NATO fared in Operation ALLIED EFFORT in its PSYOPS campaign, and recommendations as to what changes should be made.

Lies, Damned Lies, and PSYOPS

PSYOPS and its practitioners are often misunderstood, and the discipline is alleged by even senior NATO military commanders to be a 'black art' practiced by dealers of lies and deceit. This is very far from the truth and does a great deal of harm to those trying to conduct effective PSYOPS in NATO operations.

Still, it is important to recognize that people from an egalitarian cultural heritage have an innate distaste for the concepts of perception manipulation and deception. Notions of fair play, due process, and an open society are seemingly placed in jeopardy by the prospect of psychological operations – even if directed towards an adversary. Many in positions of authority often tend to dismiss the psychological dimension and feel uncomfortable with the implications.

Efforts to make the PSYOPS functions more publicly palatable and politically acceptable have led to a plethora of PSYOPS synonyms such as: perception management, persuasion operations, information support, information campaign, influence operations, etc. NATO PSYOPS practitioners are sensitive to this issue and often try to make a differentiation between their "truth-based PSYOPS" and what they term as the "lie-based propaganda" of the adversary (Taylor 1995). Because of this confusion, it is always helpful to start out with some definitions.

> The role of psychological operations (PSYOPS) is to influence the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour of selected individuals or groups with the goal of achieving political or military objectives while preventing effective use of these activities by an enemy or adversary. (NATO MC 402 1997)

PSYOPS, like all military activities, is divided into tactical, operational, and strategic spheres. In accordance with PSYOPS policy, PSYOPS, within the NATO context is limited to operating in support of the local military commander -- confined to what could be termed low level operational and tactical PSYOPS. Strategic PSYOPS, as it is defined within NATO policy:

> Strategic PSYOPS Activities (SPA) are high level (i.e. national government level) PSYOPS conducted in peace, crisis and war and directed toward friendly, hostile, potentially hostile or neutral audiences. Normally the objectives of strategic psychological activities are long-term and political in nature, they aim to undermine the adversary's, or a potential adversary's readiness for conflict, will to fight and to reduce his war-making capability while gaining the support and cooperation of neutral and friendly populations. Conduct of SPA is a national responsibility. The NAC has the responsibility of coordinating these high level activities among the nations. (NATO MC 402 1997)

And unlike NATO military doctrine, NATO policy is not a guideline or recommendation that can either be followed or ignored as the local commander sees fit. Policy documents are hard constraints placed upon NATO by its constituent nations to ensure adherence to certain procedures and conduct.

Is it Broken?

Why change the manner in which PSYOPS currently operates in NATO? In the past, clear distinctions existed between the three levels of PSYOPS -- strategic, operational, and tactical. In the post-Cold War world, these distinctions have blurred to the extent that they may not longer exist. The world's almost instantaneous access to news and information make it nearly impossible to localize any PSYOPS effort. A leaflet handed out by a PSYOPS soldier in Bosnia is just as likely to be shown to a reporter on the nightly news in all the NATO capitals as read in Sarajevo. Strategic PSYOPS, as MC 402 correctly points out, is planned and conducted at the highest levels and have long-term, political goals and implications. Military PSYOPS, while it must *never conduct unilateral* strategic perception activities, it can *support these actions* by providing planning and subject matter expertise, and if tasked, with dissemination assets.

Today, however, there is no systemic arrangement for NATO military PSYOPS to gain insight into the higher-level political perception management effort that might be planned and implemented at NATO HQ. Military PSYOPS needs knowledge of these activities in order to ensure the supported commander's theater information effort is synchronized with them.

Even the most creative PSYOPS products, and the most modern media and technologies for delivering PSYOPS messages, will lead to very little unless there is co-ordination with respect to the perception management message intent and content from NATO HQ all the way down to the tactical PSYOPS solider in the field. PSYOPS now has to react within 12-hour news cycle that drives all information efforts during crisis and war. As PSYOPS structures adapt to this frenetic pace of message/counter-message, co-ordination of the type described above becomes even more important (SECDEF 2000). Indeed, NATO's former Supreme Allied Commander, GEN (ret.) Wesley Clark gives a first hand account (Clark 2001) of the how the news cycle drove his staff's work (the so-called 'battle rhythm' of daily meetings and intelligence updates) during Operation ALLIED FORCE -- the bombing of Serbia and Kosovo during Spring 1999.

NATO's PSYOPS perception management dysfunction offers potential adversaries a clear asymmetric opportunity during crises. As military analyst Steven Metz notes:

> In an attempt to trump the American [or NATO] advantage at rational war [use of technology to prevent 'hand-on conflicts'], enemies will utilize ambiguity and attempt to stay below the threshold of clear aggression. Existing or emerging enemies will thus seek asymmetric counters – technological, psychological, ethical, and strategic. Consequently, America [and NATO] will require increased cross-cultural and socio-psychological acumen. (Metz 1999)

As seen in the conflict with Serbia, NATO adversaries are far more likely to attack NATO asymmetrically through information operations (INFO OPS), particularly strategic PSYOPS, as opposed to traditional military means. Indeed, often more flexible and synchronized, and less restricted by bureaucratic barriers, NATO's adversaries will attempt to manipulate NATO's strategic actions through selected, discriminate propaganda.

Putting aside more traditional military conflict, trans-national and trans-regional threats to NATO members, such as terrorism and development and transport of weapons of mass destruction, further accentuate the need for a more proactive PSYOPS policy by NATO. These latter threats do not lend themselves to easy compartmentalization within a specified theater of operations. Consequently, PSYOPS efforts that can overcome these boundaries, the seam between strategic and operational areas of responsibility, are needed today and require integration and planning at the highest levels.

NATO HQ has made some attempts to grasp the PSYOPS issue and provide some direction. However, nations within the NATO Alliance constantly wrestle over definitions and the roles of perception forces within the various layers of the NATO Command structure. Currently, during a crisis, at the NATO HQ level, an *ad hoc* Media Operations Centre (MOC) is created, and theoretically, an Information Operations Working Group (IOWG) is stood-up as well. The purpose of the MOC is to bring together press officers from all the NATO nations to ensure the information that is put out to the news media throughout the Alliance nations is synchronized and consistent. The theoretical purpose of the IOWG is to provide the direction to the various elements conducting perception operations at lower levels in the NATO structure. While the MOC was active during ALLIED FORCE and has been manned during exercises, the IOWG is a group that exists on paper only and has never been activated. One of the reasons for the IOWG's theoretical nature is that there is a lack of perception management experience and expertise at the NATO HQ level, and no actual PSYOPS experience whatsoever.

While some might want to limit NATO's role in this area and may feel comfortable with this void at the top (purposely cultivating an organizational deficiency), for those below it can prove very challenging. It is clear that there must be congruence between policy as expressed at NATO HQ and actions on the ground. When there is no guidance from above, or when policy objectives remain nebulous or kept from those below, pressure is placed on the PSYOPS operators at the lower rungs in the chain-of-command to either do nothing, or even more dangerously, make policy decisions and run an uncoordinated campaign that runs the risk of being contradicted by the decisions and actions of those above (Pollock 1976).

ALLIED FORCE – A Preview of Coming Attractions

As the Clark quotation at the beginning of this study suggests, ALLIED FORCE was as much, if not more, a perceptions battle than a traditional kinetic conflict (Collins 2000). In fact, in hindsight, judging by the small amount of damage done to the Serbian military force during ALLIED FORCE (Barry and Thomas 2000, Clark Interview 2000), the kinetic portion of ALLIED FORCE shrinks in comparison to the daily battles on CNN and other news venues. The Serbs were content to avoid confrontation with NATO by way of a direct military approach, and to fight in an asymmetric

manner through the weapons of the Internet and statements to the international press corps in Belgrade. As Clark notes in his book, he spent a great deal of his time reacting to the media operations initiated by the Serbs rather than focusing on the purely military tasks.

Over time, NATO learned that it had to respond in kind to the Serbian strategic PSYOPS campaign. The bombing effort that some in the West felt would loosen Slobodan Milosevic's grip on Kosovo within 3-days turned into a 78-day campaign of attrition, with PSYOPS becoming more and more an item of emphasis. After a slow start, over 100 million NATO leaflets eventually papered Serbia and its population of a mere 12 million. NATO radio and television broadcasts emanated from land and airborne broadcast transmitters and attempted to take the 'hearts and minds' fight to Milosevic. As *New York Times* reporter Steven Erlanger noted:

> What began as a campaign against the Yugoslav military, to get Slobodan Milosevic to capitulate quickly over Kosovo, veered, perhaps out of frustration, into a psy-ops war aimed also at civilians, at their electricity and their water and their heating plants. (Erlanger 1999)

Nevertheless, despite a tremendous amount of money and energy, the NATO PSYOPS effort was not very effective during ALLIED FORCE. The Serbs proved very resistant to the NATO PSYOPS effort. NATO's *outside* efforts of perception management focused on the Serbs failed miserably. Later efforts to over-throw Milosevic *within* Serbia by the student organization OTPOR were, by contrast, incredibly successful. The use of OTPOR to change the perceptions of the people of Serbia is a story yet to be fully told, but an excellent example of successful strategic PSYOPS.

While NATO has yet to learn and implement the perception lessons of its conflict with Serbia, of more immediate importance to NATO is how to confront the asymmetric efforts of nations or trans-national entities that may use terrorism, or threaten of the use of weapons of mass destruction, against the nations of the Alliance. These threats cross national boundaries and are not neatly confined to a military commander's joint operational area. While nations will continue to combat these threats in manner that conforms to their own interest, NATO must be prepared to assist, using the pooled resources of all the members of the Alliance. PSYOPS in support of perception management offers the NATO leaders a more discreet, a more targeted, and often more politically palatable tool than blunt conventional military activities that ham-fistedly put 'steel on target.'

Additionally, NATO's continued activities in the Balkans demonstrate that today there is a seam between traditional operational and traditional strategic activities that needs to be filled and a policy modification must therefore take place. NATO clearly has interests in the region and has some kind of diplomatic game-plan. But implementation of any NATO policy within the Balkans will be most effective if *all instruments of power*: military, diplomatic, economic, *and informational* are in play by NATO. PSYOPS can be an important player in the exercising of informational power -- but only if it included in the original calculus.

What to Do

This paper is not an argument for more PSYOPS organizations or more bureaucracy to add to an already heavily bureaucratic structure. The changes that need to take place are more subtle but still could have great impact. There is no need or call for NATO to become a 'supranational' organization that attempts to take over the duties and responsibilities of the member nations.

However, NATO's view of PSYOPS and perception management as a whole reflects an outdated Cold War mentality. As one observer noted:

> …PSYOP[S] has perhaps suffered most from identification with the hardware and missions of the tactical battlefield – that is, leaflet delivery, loudspeakers, and radio broadcasting. As a result of this, PSYOP[S] has

> had very low priority in terms of personnel, equipment, training, exercising, and doctrine. In addition, it has suffered from low visibility at senior command levels within the military… (Lord 1989)

PSYOPS within NATO need no longer be just 'leaflets and loudspeakers.' Modern communications methods have dramatically changed the way in which PSYOPS dissemination can occur. PSYOPS targeting in today's age can be precise – mass PSYOPS need no longer be the primary means to conduct information dissemination. The Internet, email, personal computers, paging systems, cellular telephones, CD-ROMs, allows the modern PSYOPS practitioner to target specific segments of the population – even individuals. Today's marketing firms still use mass mailings, but with the message modified to correspond to the changing incomes, ethnicity, family situations, etc., of specific population segments. Many today seek information through hundreds of television channels, radio stations, the Internet, or printed media. Specific PSYOPS targeting, *exploiting* the diffusion of information dissemination can be more effective than older methods and lessen potential 'information collateral damage.' PSYOPS products need no longer be of the 'lowest common denominator' in order to appeal to a mass audience of hundreds of thousands.

This brings us to the various items recommended for action. While these are relatively small steps, this should begin the process of allowing NATO to use the PSYOPS tool more assertively and effectively.

- Explore and change policy to allow NATO PSYOPS to operate in the seam between strategic and operational spheres -- as in the Balkans. Some have suggested that this could be called Conflict Prevention Psychological Activities (CPPA) (Westenkirchner 2002).

  Proposed definition:

  'Conflict Prevention Psychological Activities (CPPA): Planned psychological activities in peace and crisis directed at target audiences in non-NATO countries in order to contribute to crisis management, deter conflict, and prevent outbreak of hostilities. CPPA are conducted in support of NATO diplomatic actions and in consonance with Alliance strategic objectives'.

- Convene the NATO HQ Information Operations Working Group and make it a permanent fixture in NATO HQ. Have it begin to work on issues that cross political and military boundaries. Ensure PSYOPS participation and expertise is included in the IOWG.

- Discuss with nations the viability of a standing PSYOPS capability to provide planning expertise on a continuous basis to NATO HQ.

NATO found in its last military effort against Serbia that the battle to shape the international and regional perception of the conflict was more important than the casualties sustained or the land controlled. Certainly this trend will only be accentuated in the future. Consequently, the "battle for the mind" must be a central feature of future NATO actions -- at all levels of diplomatic and military activity. By adding PSYOPS within the "seam" between operational and strategic matters, NATO can begin to feel more comfortable that they can contest the informational 'high ground' in any future crises and conflicts.

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